

## First Alaskan Dental Therapists to Qualify

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The first Alaskan dental therapists educated and trained at the University of Otago will be awarded their Diplomas at the University's graduation ceremony tomorrow (Saturday 4 December).

After their two-year course in Dunedin, the four dental therapists are heading back to Alaska to provide dental care in remote villages through Alaska's rural Community Health Aid programme.

"The dental therapists will be able to provide oral health care, including undertaking procedures such as fillings and extractions, along with educating their communities in good oral health care and habits in accordance with the course they have undertaken," says Professor Tom Kardos, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at the University's Faculty of Dentistry.

"These Alaskan oral health professionals are pioneers. The work they are heading back to do is challenging and exciting, and it has been rewarding to have been involved in their education and training. Dental therapists are members of the oral health care team that have been trained to provide a vital health service for children and adolescent members of the community that don't have ready access to dental care."

Professor Kardos says it is unfortunate that these therapists are going back into the middle of a political row over the place of dental therapists in the United States. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act, currently under consideration, would allow therapists to deliver oral health care in regions where there is a need for appropriately trained professionals. However, the American Dental Association (ADA) is lobbying against parts of the Act, and wants dental therapists banned from carrying out certain procedures. The ADA considers that only dentists should carry out procedures such as the placement of fillings and extractions.

"Unfortunately that doesn't get around the problem of how to provide care to youth in remote communities unable to attract dentists.

"Dental therapists have worked in New Zealand for almost 90 years and have also been in the workforce in other countries for a considerable period of time. Both here and overseas, dental therapists have an excellent safety record. Concerns about the so-called 'risks' of treatment by a dental therapist rather than a dentist need to be weighed up against health risks to the community from failure of early clinical intervention. Further,

the costs of failing to intercept early caries that leads on to medical complications is high and untreated dental decay can lead to a variety of medical conditions, some of which are extremely serious,” says Professor Kardos.

“The Community Health Aid programme is a fantastic initiative and these dental health aide therapists will be delivering a service within their scope of training where it’s needed. New Zealand faces similar challenges in improving oral health care services to remote rural and Maori communities,” he says.

Professor Kardos says the dental therapists’ programme of training and education has been accredited by the Dental Council of New Zealand and the accreditation process includes relativity with Australian programmes. Their research-informed education and training has been under the auspices of the University’s Faculty of Dentistry since 1998. Further, the programme operates under the new Health Practitioner’s Competence Assurance Act, which has patient safety as a prime concern and requires registration and continuing professional education of therapists and other health professionals such as doctors and dentists.

The graduating therapists are Bobby Curtis, Lily McGilton, Conan Murat and Stephanie Woods. They come from locations throughout Alaska and represent a range of indigenous cultures. A further thirteen students from Alaska are still undergoing their studies in Dunedin.

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